

House Republican Press Release

June 21, 2006
Press Office: 860-240-8700

State Delivers on Autism, Special Education



By state Rep. Cathy C. Tymniak, R-133

There is good news in the recently adopted state budget for young people with special educational needs.

Included in the budget, after years of advocacy by parents and concerned legislators, is a first-in-Connecticut \$1,000,000 pilot program of services for young adults with autism. All but two states already provide some assistance to adults with autism.

Also, as school districts have requested, more state aid is coming to fund the expenses of students with special education needs. Supplemental special education funding of \$20 million was added to the budget just prior to final passage. For Westport that means an additional \$164,000 and Fairfield \$233,000.

Autism is a particular issue. It is not considered mental retardation, but a brain disorder that begins in early childhood and persists throughout adulthood. It affects three crucial areas of development: communication, social interaction, and creative or imaginative play. The state funds services for children with autism, but services typically ended at age 18.

I have been working with autism advocacy groups for more than four years toward a state-funded program to help young people with autism spectrum disorder after they pass school age. Our goal is to help these young people fulfill their great potential by obtaining jobs and living independently.

In 2002, a legislatively mandated advisory commission recommended the development and implementation of a statewide coordinated interagency system of services and supports for people with developmental disabilities who do not have retardation (a population that includes people with autism) and their families.

At long last, that program begins now. I hope it succeeds and grows in future years.

Included in the new state budget is a \$1-million appropriation and a plan to work with up to 50 young people with autism and not covered under mental retardation programs. Under the new budget:

- The state Commissioner of Mental Retardation will establish eligibility requirements for participation in the program.
- The state Department of Mental Retardation (DMR) will identify appropriate individualized services and supports for each person in the program and the family of each person in the program and shall coordinate the provision of such services and supports to such person and family.

The pilot program will begin by October 1, 2006, and shall terminate not later than October 1, 2008, if not extended by future legislatures. The Commissioner of Mental Retardation must report to the legislature not later than January 1, 2009, concerning the results of the pilot program and recommendations for the future.

DMR is the lead agency for coordinating state services for people with autism. All DMR services (e.g., employment and day services, residential options, respite care and other parental supports) are available to adults with autism who also have mental retardation (that is an IQ of 70 or less). These adults are covered for home- and community-based services, which permits DMR clients who would otherwise need to be placed in institutional settings to remain in their homes. But DMR services and coverage are not available to adults with autism whose IQs measure above 70.

This adult autism population is a valuable component of society. Many are skilled and capable individuals. They have much to contribute and are capable of supporting themselves. Many go on to successful working careers.

For all students with emotional, physical or mental disabilities, state and federal law have long mandated a full-range of educational services the same as other children. The problem is state aid for special education has lagged behind the rising cost of providing special education services. An additional \$20 million is forthcoming to local school districts during the next school year, and I hope to see this sum increase in future years.

State Rep. Cathy C. Tymniak serves the 133rd Assembly District of Fairfield and Westport.